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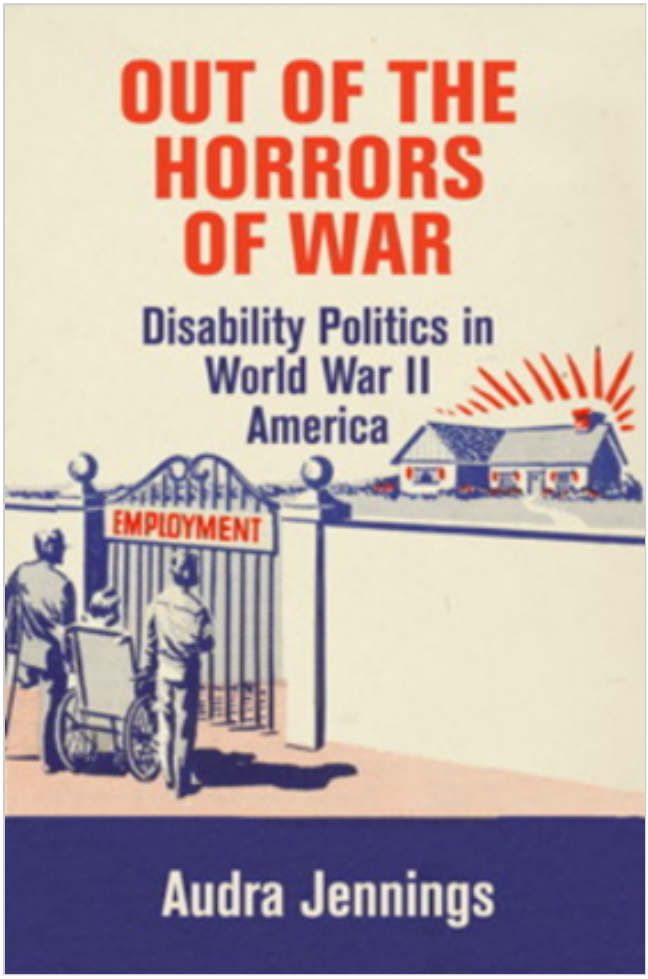
Opening the gate: disability politics and social responsibility

Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America. By Audra Jennings. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 296 pp., $55.00 cloth.



In this book, historian Audra Jennings examines disability politics in the United States during and shortly after World War II. Intended as a political history, the author's account has two sides—that of people who benefited from disability activism and that of political representatives involved in policy action. In revealing the complexity of disability politics at the time—complexity that has persisted to the present day—Jennings often recounts the experiences and struggles of real people. Among these was Ms. Mildred Scott, one of many disabled by polio, who read a pamphlet about disability in early 1943 and wrote to the publisher of the document for more information. That publisher was the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped (AFPH), one of the strongest cross-disability advocacy groups headed by Paul Strachan, whose story figures prominently in the book. In making her request, Ms. Scott was drawn to more than the promises of "justice," "opportunity," "unity," and "equal rights." She wanted to put these ideals into practice for her benefit and the benefit of others. In that era, shadows still loomed over those needing public support, many of whom lacked job skills because of disability.

This context provides a higher vantage point from which the reader can view the success of the disability rights movement, as well as an insight into the who's who during that era of struggle. People are introduced in stages as the author takes the reader through the gathering momentum of evolving political action. There were rivals and collaborators, interested observers, private sector interests,

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and government representatives, such as those from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and various parts of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Often, serious rivalries centered on where aid to the disabled should come from and what type of aid should be provided. Many of the programs discussed among government representatives focused on providing assistance and training to veterans. The onset of World War II brought attention—perhaps for the first time ever—to the contribution physically challenged people could bring to society. The disability movement awakened support both for those who "fought for victory" in active combat abroad (many of whom returned wounded) and for those who made their contribution on the home front.

The movement had a great supporter in President Franklin Roosevelt. In his State of the Union speech in 1944, the President presented ideas that Americans accepted as self-evident. Key among these was the notion that a new set of rights could exist, including "the right to a useful and remunerative job," "the right to earn enough to provide adequate food, and clothing and recreation," "the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health," "the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident and unemployment," and "the right to a good education." Roosevelt considered this set a second "Bill of Rights." As noted by Jennings, his New Deal set up policy that led people to "look increasingly to the federal government to guarantee access to opportunity."

Wartime employment opportunities helped the AFHP and other disability rights activists place disabled veterans and others in better jobs that paid higher wages. This progress was made possible both by improved employment hiring practices, which were put in place to deal with labor shortages and make space for disabled veterans, and by states' efforts to encourage and facilitate those practices. Debates on counseling and education provided valuable insights into what educators, rehabilitation service specialists, medical doctors, and other therapists could provide. These insights, in turn, charted new career paths for both veterans and disabled members of society.

A door was opened to those who wanted to work productively and know physical comfort by providing for themselves. The cover drawing of the book shows three disabled people at the gate of a large estate, where a big sign reads, "Employment." In the center, a woman sits in a wheelchair; the man to her left has an amputated leg; and a wounded corporal stands to the woman's right, still in uniform with his right shirt sleeve sewn up because of his amputated arm. On the other side of a long wall and its large gate is a big new house with a nice yard, the roof lit up by what are rays of sunlight on a new day. The message is clear: employment opens the gates of opportunity, where everyone can gainfully earn his or her future comfort, prosperity, and success. For the disabled, stability includes owning a home and achieving one clear and simple goal—being gainfully employed.

Moving beyond the wartime period, Jennings also looks at disability politics in the immediate aftermath of the war, introducing more actors, including the U.S. Congress. In 1946, a bill was introduced by Representative John J. Sparkman that would have authorized many of the changes the AFPH wanted. A subcommittee on labor in the U.S. House of Representatives set up a 2-year investigation into the provision of aid to the physically handicapped. The disabled no doubt still felt the "stigma of charity and the unwilling care of relatives." At this point, the players in the disability movement included Paul Strachan of the AFPH; the congressional subcommittee; other disability rights activists; providers of medical care, training, and rehabilitation; employers; and society itself. The AFPH was led by handicapped individuals, as were the American Federation of the Blind and other advocacy groups. While these actors saw common struggles and problems, wielding more power than ever before, they sometimes became rivals in their vision of how to achieve their goals. Some fought for job training, others fought for financial

assistance, yet others fought over where the assistance should come from and how it should be used. In hindsight, there was no tight unit of likeminded activists, but a mix of diverse interests.

The AFPH insisted on congressional action and was successful in encouraging Congress to deliver findings on the disabled that led to federal- and state-level antidiscrimination laws. (These efforts laid the groundwork for the eventual adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.) Veterans were provided with rehabilitation services and job training, and these gains were shared by others with physical or mental handicaps. Public servants in the VA, along with private sector stakeholders, researched healthcare programs, identifying tasks that could help the wounded and the disabled lead productive working lives. DOL agencies were also heavily involved in providing training and, when needed, financial support. These players helped the handicapped break down doors that blocked their way to success. They increased awareness of discrimination and encouraged the private sector to employ disabled people through initiatives such as the National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.

None of these benefits would have become a reality without the provision of rights to those most in need. An open gate where justice is served illustrates that society can unite and be strongest when all of its members are included. The message of Jennings's book is clear—we will never see the end of disability unless society embraces those who need society the most. In the process, Americans will open their eyes to what we are called to defend. The train keeps rolling.